



James, S. (2016). Stevie Smith, 'A Most Awful Twister'. *Essays in Criticism*, 66(2), 242-259. <https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgw005>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1093/escrit/cgw005](https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgw005)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)  
PDF-document

## University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Stevie Smith, 'A Most Awful Twister'

STEPHEN JAMES

'Work it out for yourself': this is how Stevie Smith greets her readers in the subtitle to her debut book, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), and it shows the writer starting as she means to go on.<sup>1</sup> With this blunt injunction, Smith puts her readers on their guard, at once drawing them in and holding them at a wary distance. The double effect of wry cajolment and arch standoffishness that typifies Smith's authorial manner is already writ in miniature. So too is the perpetual dilemma her writing engenders: is one being granted interpretative freedom or alerted to the presence of a predetermined meaning that lies in wait? Is it a secret or a bluff that Smith so insouciantly flaunts? *Novel on Yellow Paper* introduces a distinctive new literary voice that is both unsparingly direct in its autobiographical revelations and dizzyingly indirect in its beguiling playfulness. Here, as in so much of her writing, it is the peculiar tension between the candid and the coded that proves so disarming.

In working things out for oneself, one rarely escapes the sense that Smith is withholding something that one needs to discover, or that there is a particular angle from which to view the writing in order to discern and appreciate what it conveys. At the same time, one often feels that striving to work things out is at odds with something blithe and breezy in the author's voice, that the temptation to produce what Ian Hamilton refers to as 'earnestly complicated accounts' is at odds with the improvised, extemporised quality of the work.<sup>2</sup> And yet there are many occasions on which Smith's writings seem conspicuously to invite painstaking

exegesis, even though something in the manner of expression defies it. It is hard not to feel caught in a trap: the work may seem to require a fastidious response which cannot but be misaligned with the flippancy and frivolity, at times even the facetiousness, of Smith's characteristic style.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the only viable critical recourse is to make this misalignment part of one's subject: if there is a sense in which Smith stands knowingly, ironically to one side of her own poetic idiom, it seems only right to remain partly detached from, and quizzical about, one's own interpretative forays.

In this hesitant, self-questioning spirit, one might assume the role of code-cracker and critical sleuth. After all, this is a part that Smith invented for her readers when she commenced her literary endeavours. *Novel on Yellow Paper* is a work of frequently perverse encryption and presents the reader with a plethora of puzzles. The confiding, confessional nature of the authorial voice belies this, but Smith speaks – as she does in her subsequent novel, *Over the Frontier* (1938) – in the guise of a protagonist with an overtly contrived code-name that asks to be deciphered.<sup>4</sup> 'Pompey Casmilus' is a self-consciously absurd pseudonym amalgamating the Roman military general and consul Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (106-48 BC) and the messenger of the gods, here identified obscurely as Casmilus, but better known as Hermes in Greek and Mercury in Roman mythology.<sup>5</sup> The mock-hubris of Smith's identification with these figures is evident, as is the sheer oddity of using two male names for a female protagonist (a gender-bending tendency that persists through the work of 'Stevie' - née Florence

Margaret - Smith); what one is left to work out for oneself are the supposed grounds of her affinity with them.<sup>6</sup> For scholarly spade-work, one might make use of John Lemprière's *A Classical Dictionary*, a copy of which Smith is known to have owned, for here one can unearth some pertinent parallels between the author and her classical precursors. In the case of Pompey the Great, Lemprière presents an abstemious individual who prized loyal friendships, 'lived with great temperance and moderation', and whose 'house was small, and not ostentatiously furnished', all qualities that accord with aspects of Smith's biography and self-presentation, while the tendency towards 'dissimulation' and 'duplicity of behaviour' by this 'intriguing and artful' and often 'dictatorial' character speaks to the author's shifty strategies and contrivances.<sup>7</sup> Lemprière's sketch of one of Smith's avatars proves pertinent, but the protagonist of *Novel on Yellow Paper* decodes things further, and offers a more personal inflection, when she claims that the name

Pompey [...] suits me. There's something meretricious and decayed and I'll say, I dare say, elegant about Pompey. A broken Roman statue. One of those old Roman boys that lost their investments and went round getting free meals on their dear old friends, that had them round to fill up the gaps, and keep things moving. (*NYP*, p. 20)

The peculiar and piquant manner of tragicomic self-portraiture adopted here, as so often in Smith's work, is liable to alienate even as it endears. At once self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating, the voice chatters on as if presuming that the reader is already comfortably acquainted with the qualities of Pompey the Great which furnish the parallels. Yet one senses that Smith also knows (and seems not to care) that this may not be the case, that things may have to

be looked up and thought through, and she is content to leave her readers to work out for themselves – if they are sufficiently assiduous (or asinine in their academic absurdities) - the implications of what they might discover in Lemprière or elsewhere. The discrepancy between the casual and the cunning in Smith's manner of dealing with her readers is of a piece with the discrepancy between openness and obliquity in her self-presentation. The absurdist form of afflatus by which Smith ascribes her own anxiety and fragility, neediness and isolation, pomposity and vanity to an historical alter ego distances and renders ironic these qualities, even as they are poignantly disclosed.

The surname of Smith's fictional double also denotes a role of complex significance, as is suggested by the short poem presented as an epigraph to *Novel on Yellow Paper* from the second printing onwards:

Casmilus, whose great name I steal,  
Whose name a greater doth conceal,  
Indulgence, pray,  
And, if I may,  
The winged tuft from either heel.

(*NYP*, p. 9)<sup>8</sup>

There is a nice irony in Smith seeking to purloin the name and winged boots of the god who was championed as, among other things, the patron of thieves. The combination of artless effrontery ('I steal'), wheedling charm ('pray', 'if I may') and irreverent debunking ('winged tuft') is characteristic of qualities that pervade Smith's oeuvre. The epigraph to her first book thus stands as an appropriately quirky entrance arch – at once inviting and forbidding – through which the

bemused reader must pass into the strange world of Stevie Smith. In an odd twist to the conventional idea of an author requesting the ‘indulgence’ of the reader at the outset of a literary work, Smith seeks tolerance instead from the god whose attributes she robs with brazen charm. Yet the reader too must indulge Smith if the mixture of impudence and indirection with which she ventures forth into her novel, and her writing career, is to be accepted. On the one hand, she hints at a solution to the riddle of her epigraph by suggesting that the recondite figure of Casmilus can be translated into a more recognizable type, and by implication that the motives behind the author’s recondite manoeuvres can be gleaned; on the other hand, the fact that Casmilus is better known not by one ‘greater’ name but two – Hermes and Mercury – only displaces the identity puzzle. There are multiple legends associated with this figure of multiple names, and many of his actions and attributes indicate chicanery and guile. As Smith noted in a letter to the Irish playwright Denis Johnston shortly after the publication of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, ‘Casmilus is a dark name to fight under and he was a most awful twister’.<sup>9</sup> The name thus provides a fitting cloak for an author who was drawn to dark psychological territory and whose work is littered with shape-shifting personae, baffling conundrums and perverse twists.

William May has noted that, while much has been made of the significance of the Casmilus figure in relation to the narrative method of *Novel on Yellow Paper* and *Over the Frontier*, the implications of this alternative identity have ‘never been applied critically to the personae in her poetry’.<sup>10</sup> That is curious, not only because

of the obvious continuities in voice, method and subject matter between Smith's works in prose and verse, but also because Smith wrote a poem expressly about Casmilus and included it in the essay 'My Muse' (1960), the closest thing she has to an artistic credo.<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, both this essay and the poem within it that, by implication, is at the heart of her philosophy of poetry have been almost entirely neglected by Smith critics to date. 'The Ambassador' was first published in the volume *Harold's Leap* (1950) and is, in Smith's own description, 'a riddle poem [...] about a very subtle and powerful god'.<sup>12</sup> It is also an intricate and enigmatic artistic self-portrait:

Underneath the broad hat is the face of the Ambassador  
 He rides on a white horse through hell looking two ways.  
 Doors open before him and shut when he has passed.  
 He is master of the mysteries and in the market place  
 He is known. He stole the trident, the girdle,  
 The sword, the sceptre and many mechanical instruments.  
 Thieves honour him. In the underworld he rides carelessly.  
 Sometimes he rises into the air and flies silently.

(CPD, p. 282)<sup>13</sup>

True to the formulae of riddles, 'The Ambassador' mystifies even in its seemingly blank, neutral register: he is this; he does that; who is he? What does he mean?

The first clue comes when one realises that the poem refers back to, and reworks, Pompey Casmilus's self-description in *Novel on Yellow Paper*:

I have travelled and come and gone a great deal, I am a *toute entière* visitor. [...] The rhythm of visiting is in my blood. Under what tutelary deity shall I place myself? Under Mercury, double-facing, looking two ways, lord of the underworld, riding on the white horse, riding through hell, opener of doors; Hermes. (NYP, p. 212)

This passage enables one to begin to crack the code of ‘The Ambassador’, but there is much more to be done if one is to piece together the poem’s implications. Another prompt to interpretation derives from a comment Smith made in a radio broadcast in 1957, in which, as Jack Barbera and William McBrien point out in their biography of Smith,

Stevie said of this poem: ‘I will tell you who he is, he is Mercury. ... In his Phoenician form he is known as Casmilus. That is a most beautiful name. It is only to be found in the 1823 edition of Lemprière, a misprint, I think, for Camilus.’<sup>14</sup>

Even at this moment of helpful elucidation, Smith revels in whimsical obliquity. When ‘The Ambassador’ was reprinted in the *Selected Poems* of 1962 she added as epigraph ‘... known also among the Phoenicians as Casmilus’ and attributed the phrase to Lemprière.<sup>15</sup> The addition seems designed at once to satisfy and to provoke the sleuth instinct in her readers, especially as it makes clear the link back to *Novel on Yellow Paper* that might otherwise have been missed. In invoking her fictional soubriquet, Smith goes a little way towards helping the reader solve the mysteries of her poem, yet her recourse to an antiquated misspelling of a relatively unfamiliar version of a name (Camilus) for a deity who has two other more familiar monikers and numerous disparate legends maintains Smith’s ‘work it out for yourself’ spirit. William May wonders if an anxiety that Lemprière’s phrase only intensifies the poem’s complexity prompted James MacGibbon to omit the epigraph in the 1975 *Collected* and 1978 *Selected Poems*; certainly, there is justice in May’s claim that ‘by offering us a tidier version of Smith’s titles, MacGibbon closes



off possibilities in reading across the range of her poetry and prose'.<sup>16</sup> One wonders also if the omission is symptomatic of a wider bafflement among some of Smith's readers concerning the air of erudition that, however ironic it may be, sometimes hovers over her writing – as when she games with Latin, French or German, alludes to other authors or slips into a conspicuously artificial antiquated idiom. The work of T. S. Eliot encourages one to know about Phoenicians and to take account of innumerable literary and mythological cross-references: is there a joke here at Eliot's expense, or perhaps a more general dig at the idea of poetry as mystery cult?<sup>17</sup> Yet the idea of Smith as an allusive, modernist (even mock-modernist) writer does not consort well with the effects of levity, irreverence, even slightness that characterise much of her work.

Smith was attuned to the ludic spirit at the etymological heart of allusion. In the delightfully 'awful twister' of 'The Ambassador' she 'rides carelessly', but not without contrivance, between different qualities of her legendary kindred spirit. In effect, she is one shape-shifter in the guise of another, and the implications this generates as to how to respond to her work, in all its seeming simplicities and devilish difficulties, are rich and various. Lemprière identifies Mercurius, a deity with 'many surnames and epithets', as 'the ambassador and plenipotentiary of the gods', 'with a winged cap called *petasus*, and with wings for his feet called *talaria*'.<sup>18</sup> While those '*talaria*' figure in Smith's image of the 'winged tuft[s]' in the epigraph to *Novel on Yellow Paper*, the '*petasus*' finds its analogue in the 'broad hat' of 'The

Ambassador'. Frances Spalding, one of Smith's biographers, connects this image in turn to that of the writer herself sporting 'a broad-brimmed hat' on the back cover publicity photo for her debut novel.<sup>19</sup> Finding that the hat of Casmilus fits, Smith wears it, although it remains a moot point whether the face below is framed or obscured by the chosen headgear: in locating the Ambassador's face '[u]nderneath the broad hat', Smith chooses a preposition that has a more subterfuge tinge to it than 'under'. Just so, the other attributes of the deity swiftly enumerated in her poem at once reveal the author and hide her in a network of codes. Lemprière notes that Mercury 'conducted the souls of the dead into the infernal regions', and Smith depicts the legendary psychopomp riding through the underworld, with doors opening before him and shutting when he has passed.<sup>20</sup> But in her poem there is no mention of any souls in the Ambassador's charge. Rather, those doors may make one think of the author's temperamental detachment from others: bearing in mind Smith's autobiographical account of herself, in the flimsy guise of Pompey Casmilus, as 'a *toute entière* visitor', who has 'travelled and come and gone a great deal', it is possible to discern in Smith's poem a cryptic expression of her characteristic oscillation between the desire for the open doors of friendship and the relief of solitude when sociability has ended and doors have been closed.<sup>21</sup> (An alternative reading of 'Doors open before him and shut when he has passed' is that opportunities beckon, only to be sealed off, for in the optical and semantic trickery of Smith's phrasing, it is not clear if the elusive divinity passes through or passes by those doors.) But the god's frequent visiting of the underworld also presumably

stands for Smith's repeatedly voiced attraction towards death; as she herself observed in a November 1970 interview with Kay Dick, many of her poems are 'a bit deathwards in their wish'.<sup>22</sup> The careless riding of the Ambassador through this dark territory parallels the offhand jauntiness with which Smith so often pursues her morbid speculations.

Like her mythical alter ego, Smith is a 'master of the mysteries' in this elaborate teaser of a poem. The eponymous Ambassador seems to function as a medium for autobiographical revelation and concealment and as a metaphor for the figure of the writer or artist more generally. For example, by stating that the 'master of the mysteries' is known in the marketplace, Smith seems to be conjuring the impression of an ostensibly otherworldly poet who nonetheless requires a market to generate a readership; there could be a tacit connection here between 'the god of merchandise among the Latins' (Lemprière), and Smith's (and Pompey Casmilus's) day job in commercial publishing.<sup>23</sup> But what is one to make of the criminality and deceit of Smith's roguish classical precursor? 'Thieves honour him', writes Smith, and Lemprière relates that this 'god of thieves, pickpockets, and all dishonest persons [...] increased his fame by robbing Neptune of his trident, Venus of her girdle, Mars of his sword, Jupiter of his sceptre, and Vulcan of many of his mechanical instruments', and that he did so through 'his craftiness and dishonesty'. When Smith presents a litany of these thefts in her poem, is the implication that literature is a form of larceny, that writers are given to stealing the characteristic qualities of others (and misrepresenting them through reductive

symbolism) for their own artistic gain? The supposition is supported by the stance of the Casmilus figure in Smith's first two novels, as the protagonist is self-laceratingly aware of the appropriations and distortions to which the people figured in the fiction are being subjected. 'My abominable namesake' is how the narrator of *Over the Frontier* defines Casmilus, and her criticism of the god's 'treacherous' nature and 'double dealing' functions as a form of authorial self-rebuke.<sup>24</sup>

The god who was 'enabled to go into whatever part of the universe he pleased with the greatest celerity', and who was 'permitted to make himself invisible, and to assume whatever shape he pleased' (Lemprière again) makes an appropriately slippery analogue for the figure of the writer. 'The Ambassador' ends with a description of its subject rising into the air and flying silently – as if the poem is describing its own vanishing act; the final metamorphosis of the text is a disappearance into stealthy silence. Smith, in assuming the shape of Casmilus and thereby gaining a form of invisibility, has moved with great speed between images and examples richly suggestive of her own concerns and practices. As a consequence, the figure of the Ambassador is susceptible to being read as the figure of the poet – an idea that is strengthened by a further attribute of the god that Smith conspicuously neglects to mention, and that readers need to work out for themselves. For, as Lemprière has it, 'the invention of the lyre and its seven strings is ascribed to him' – the lyre that was given to Apollo, the 'god of poetry' – and among the many roles ascribed to Smith's mythical proxy is that of patron of

literature and poets. But perhaps this is too exalted an association for Smith to evoke? If the Ambassador stands for a guardian of the poetic craft, it is a type of craft characterised above all by shady, unreliable dealings. That ‘most awful twister’ Casmilus – and by extension that ‘most awful twister’ Stevie Smith – is always on the move, always on the make. As the narrator of *Over the Frontier* puts it,

But once inside the house of Hades, is there any outcoming? Oh yes, my chicks, for anyone of my name there is passage to and fro, come at will and go at pleasure. But enough of the Casmilus motif, shiftiest of namesakes, [...] coming uninvited, going unpermitted, conducting on the side a nefarious business to his own advantage.<sup>25</sup>

There is much evidence to suggest that Smith saw writing itself as a ‘nefarious business’: it roams where it wills, tramples on its subjects, takes liberties, and all for its own ends. As she observes in the essay ‘My Muse’, ‘Poetry is very light-fingered, she is like the god Hermes in my poem “The Ambassador” (she is very light-fingered)’.<sup>26</sup> The repetition here acts as if to settle the point yet seems to know that, in its puckish peculiarity, it unsettles. And the double utterance taps out a double meaning by insisting at once upon the dishonesty and the deftness of the writer’s hand. To call poetry ‘light-fingered’ is both to criticise artful thievery and to celebrate the delicacy with which the poet performs her tricks – or plucks the lyre.

The next observation that Smith makes in ‘My Muse’, and the one which immediately precedes her quoting ‘The Ambassador’ in full as an expression of her creative philosophy, brings into focus a further interpretative challenge presented by the poem: ‘Also she [Poetry] is like the horse Hermes is riding, this animal is dangerous.’<sup>27</sup> The comparison of poetry to a horse (‘a white horse’ in the poem and

‘the [proverbial?] white horse’ in *Novel on Yellow Paper*) irresistibly summons Pegasus, the symbolic embodiment of poetic inspiration. This mythical stallion – winged, like its rider – is an apt emblem for Smith’s imaginative energies, for horse-riding (an activity which she enjoyed when young, and which gave rise to the nickname ‘Stevie’ in reference to a famous jockey) frequently figures in her work as an expression of transcendent, escapist and imaginative impulse.<sup>28</sup> The aptness, however, does not dispel the reader’s confusion at seeing a white horse gallop into the poem from another mythological region than that from which the rider hails: it is Bellerophon and, to a lesser extent, Perseus, not Hermes, who are recorded in classical mythology as the riders of Pegasus.<sup>29</sup> A similar effect of distraction and destabilization is achieved by Smith referring to the Ambassador as ‘looking two ways’, and as having ‘Doors open before him and shut when he has passed’ – phrases which, as others have observed, call to mind an altogether different ancient divinity. ‘Janus’, as Lemprière has it, ‘is represented with two faces, because he was acquainted with the past and the future; or, according to others, because he was taken for the sun, who opens the day at his rising, and shuts it at his setting’; as befits one with these powers, ‘he presides over all gates and avenues’.<sup>30</sup> One could counter this by noting that ‘as a messenger, [Hermes] may also have become the god of roads and doorways’,<sup>31</sup> and that his ‘double-dealing’ nature, and the fact that he was the god of crossroads, more than justifies the description of the Ambassador as one who looks in two directions. Nonetheless, the impression remains that Smith – a careless rider, a creative chameleon, a ‘most awful twister’ –

shuttles heedlessly between classical references, pilfering what she needs from here and there (a whiff of Pegasus, a pinch of Janus) to concoct her precarious composite myth of artistic impulse. Her procedures are as mercurial as Mercury, as hermetic, and as hermeneutically challenging, as the figure of Hermes.

Nor do the challenges of ‘The Ambassador’ end there: the poem is also accompanied (at least in some published versions) by one of Smith’s charming but perplexing doodles.<sup>32</sup> This, too, seems at once to invite decoding and to serve as a decoy; as is so often the case in Smith’s work, the drawing is not neatly aligned with the poem it accompanies. Her humorously gauche, lightly camp illustration depicts a man in quasi-Roman dress - something between a toga and a belted blouse-and-skirt ensemble. He does not ride a horse, but rather walks forward, while turning partly back, with his aquiline-nosed face showing in profile, and with his right arm swinging up, bent at the elbow. This jaunty pictorial Ambassador wears a hat which, though ‘winged’, is taller than it is ‘broad’, and there are no wings to his booted feet. He does, though, seem to be in the process of looking one of ‘two ways’ – albeit with a mysterious motion of a raised right hand that, like other waving gestures in Smith’s work, is liable to generate more ambiguity than it resolves.

Smith’s juxtapositions of text and image are not the product of one consistent rationale, and the balance between strategy and serendipity, whimsy and wilful intent when it comes to the pairing of poems with pictures is highly variable and often hard to gauge. MacGibbon noted in his introduction to *The Collected*

*Poems* that most of the line drawings ‘seem so apposite that it is always assumed she drew them specifically; but I have her word for it that she “doodled” these drawings and, when it came to book publication, she merely picked out such as seemed appropriate. They were strictly supplementary (after all, they seldom[,] if ever, appeared with the poems when they were originally published in periodicals)’.<sup>33</sup> Smith’s own words on the relationship between poem and sketch contain contradictions. Kay Dick recalled watching Smith inspect her drawings and say ‘I think I’ll write a poem to that one’,<sup>34</sup> yet Smith has also described the process working the other way round: ‘I take a drawing which I think “illustrates” the spirit or the idea in the poem rather than any incidents in it’.<sup>35</sup> The emphasis was different again when Smith claimed that ‘there are so many drawings, which I think are so much better than they used to be, and I can’t get the poems to tie up to them’.<sup>36</sup> This is a writer who has claimed both ‘The drawings don’t really have anything to do with the poems’<sup>37</sup> and ‘I feel the drawings are so much a part of the verses that they must be published with them’;<sup>38</sup> this is a writer, too, who sensed that light entertainment trumps weighty significance when it comes to her illustrations: ‘Here at last are the poems with the beastlies pinned on to make it more fun for everyone’.<sup>39</sup> Even without Smith’s contradictory messages, the conjunction of poem and picture is liable to confuse. One frequently wonders if a drawing is to be taken as merely decorative or revealingly illustrative - or even interpretative, if there is a sense in which the sketch appears to offer a gloss on the poem.



But do the pictures present the reader with clues or simply further codes? Is it the connection or the disjunction between the verbal and the visual that entails a response? Or are such questions absurd? The fear of silliness in the critical venture is at its most acute here. One's apprehensiveness derives partly from the misgiving that poems risk being devalued simply by occupying the same pages as, in Larkin's phrase, 'that hallmark of frivolity, *drawings*', and partly from the quaint, amateurish quality of their 'nursery book' or 'kindergarten' style.<sup>40</sup> Smith's cartoon sketch of the Ambassador is such an eccentric and seemingly off-the-cuff, unserious accompaniment to the poem as to intensify the sense of potential folly haunting one's critical response to the work as a whole – an anxiety that is only likely to increase when one considers that it was often her slighter, shorter poems which Smith supplemented with witty line drawings.

One wonders if the imp of perversity who wrote so much of Smith's work took a particular delight in the thought that adding drawings to poems would only further confound the analytical 'smarties' of the kind derided in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, to whose ranks the author of the present article assumes he is eternally consigned.<sup>41</sup> Where Smith herself is 'light-fingered', moving swiftly and gingerly from image to image, phrase to phrase, the hard-working reader risks heavy-handedness in charting the shifts and nuances of implication. Or, to take another of her analogies, Smith, as her 'tutelary deity' explains in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, is an expressly 'foot-off-the-ground' writer whose work proceeds according to associative, lateral thinking and thus militates against a denotative, literal-minded,

‘foot-on-the-ground’ response (NYP, p. 38). The novel makes clear her preferred compositional method, one in which ‘the thoughts come and go and sometimes they do not quite come and I do not pursue them to embarrass them with formality to pursue them into a harsh captivity’ (NYP, p. 38). By delivering her point in a loosely spooling syntax, Smith resists even the ‘captivity’ of standard punctuation. The risk the critic faces, when the possibilities for close analysis are abundant, is that a potentially embarrassing, imprisoning formality (and it is there even in the fastidious passing comment on missing commas) may colour the response. It is hard to avoid the sense of a bemused stand-off between Smith and her critics, hard for the latter to allay the fear of an almost comical disconnection between their attempted elucidations and the elusiveness of her artistic wiles. Smith gives her readers much that requires them to work things out for themselves, while she suggests that, in so doing, they will betray the capricious, devil-may-care spirit which ‘rides carelessly’ and ‘flies silently’ above the ground of serious scrutiny and earnest explication. Her position is akin to that of Hermes as he is defined by George Santayana in *Soliloquies in England: And Later Soliloquies* (1922), which Smith also read: he is the ‘master of riddles’ who is ‘never caught in the tangle’ he creates, and who ‘laughs to see how unnecessarily poor appointed mortals befool themselves, wilfully following any devious scent once they are on it by chance, and missing the obvious for ever’.<sup>42</sup> Smith, in her guise as the Ambassador from the realm of ‘Poetry’, threatens scornful laughter to those who would transmit and interpret the messages of her work, who would act as *her* ambassadors, and who, in

the process, are liable to fall into the various interpretative traps she has so nonchalantly prepared.

*University of Bristol*

---

## NOTES

‘Casmilus’ by Stevie Smith, from *All the Poems* and *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, copyright © 1937, 1938, 1942, 1950, 1957, 1962, 1966, 1971, 1972 by Stevie Smith. Copyright © 2016 by the Estate of James MacGibbon. Copyright © 2015 by Will May. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp and Faber and Faber Ltd.

‘The Ambassador’ by Stevie Smith, from *All the Poems* and *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, copyright © 1937, 1938, 1942, 1950, 1957, 1962, 1966, 1971, 1972 by Stevie Smith. Copyright © 2016 by the Estate of James MacGibbon. Copyright © 2015 by Will May. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp and Faber and Faber Ltd.

<sup>1</sup> Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper or Work it Out for Yourself* (1936), intr. by Janet Watts (1980). Smith repeats the injunction on the novel’s opening page (p. 9) and again when she presents her poem ‘Infant’ (‘It was a cynical babe...’) (p. 163). Further references are to *NYP*.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Hamilton, ‘Stevie Smith: 1902-1971’, in *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (2002), pp. 138-42: 139.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Larkin was attuned to ‘the streak of facetiousness’ in Smith’s work: see ‘Frivolous and Vulnerable’, *New Statesman*, 28 Sept. 1962; repr. in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (1983), pp. 153-8: 154.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Over the Frontier* (1938), intr. by Janet Watts (1980).

---

<sup>5</sup> Smith had considered using ‘Pompey Casmilus’ as the title of her novel: see *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (2015), p. xli. Further references are to *CPD*.

<sup>6</sup> The name Casmilus is reassigned to a man (the beloved cousin of the protagonist Celia) in Smith’s third novel: see *The Holiday* (1949), intr. by Janet Watts (1979). Smith’s penchant for making the readers of her poems respond to ‘a male persona spoken through the female voice’ is explored in Deryn Rees-Jones, “‘Tirry-Lirry-Lirry All the Same’: The Poetry and Performance of Stevie Smith”, in *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset, 2005), pp. 70-92: 90.

<sup>7</sup> J. Lemprière, *A Classical Dictionary: Containing a Copious Account of All the Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors* (1902), s.v. ‘Q. Pompeius’. On Smith owning Lemprière, and on the significance of the name Pompey, see also Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> The epigraph takes pride of place as the first of Smith’s uncollected poems, under the title ‘Casmilus’, in *CPD*, p. 661.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, letter to Denis Johnston, 23 Sept. 1936, in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981), pp. 253-5: 255; also cited in Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford, 2010), p. 88.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, ‘My Muse’, in *Me Again*, pp. 125-6. The essay also contains the second (and final) quatrain of the poem entitled ‘My Muse’.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, BBC recording, 8 June 1966, cited in the note to ‘The Ambassador’ in Smith, *A Selection*, ed. Hermione Lee (1983), p. 201.

<sup>13</sup> A full stop is absent at the end of the first line in this and other published versions of the poem.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (1985), p. 97 n. The biographers go on to observe that, ‘although the 1823 edition of Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary* does *not* contain the misprint Stevie mentions, the 1832 edition (which she owned) does’. Smith’s gloss on the name Casmilus is quoted from the script, held at The University of Tulsa, of ‘Too Tired for Words’, a Third Programme BBC radio broadcast of 4 March 1957; the essay of the same name published in *Medical World*, 85 in December 1956 and collected in *Me Again* (pp. 111-18) does not contain this passage. See also May’s note on ‘The Ambassador’ in *CPD*, p. 758: ‘Cf. John Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary for Schools and Academies* (1832), which misprints “Casmillus” for “Casmilus”’.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Selected Poems* (1962), p. 52. See May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, pp. 87-8.

<sup>16</sup> May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 88. Lee includes Smith’s epigraph to ‘The Ambassador’ in *A Selection* (p. 114), as does May (minus the initial ellipsis) in *CPD*.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot refers to ‘Phlebas the Phoenician’ in section IV of ‘The Waste Land’ (1922).

<sup>18</sup> Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary*, s.v. ‘Mercurius’.

---

<sup>19</sup> Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> In her letter to Johnston, Smith observes that ‘Casmilus [...] had the right of entrance to (and ahem exit from) hell’ (*Me Again*, p. 255).

<sup>21</sup> Compare the poem ‘In My Dreams’: ‘In my dreams I am always saying goodbye and riding away’ (*CPD*, p. 139). Lee’s notes to *A Selection* point out links between this poem, the ‘I have travelled...’ passage from *NYP* and ‘The Ambassador’ (pp. 188, 193, 201).

<sup>22</sup> Smith, cited in Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie. Ivy Compton-Burnett and Stevie Smith: Conversations and Reflections* (1971; repr. 1983), p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> As Barbera and McBrien note, Smith ‘was a “master of the mysteries” who was yet remarkably at home in the market place (read the West End publishing world)’ (*Stevie*, p. 97).

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Over the Frontier*, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7. May notes, in relation to the exemplary figure of Hermes, that “‘To-and-fro” is the most common co-ordinate in [Smith’s] work’ (*CPD*, p. xxx). Compare Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 97: ‘Like the god she describes, Stevie (as a story teller) looked forward and back as she sped along’.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, ‘My Muse’, p. 126.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> On Florence Margaret Smith acquiring the nickname Stevie, after the jockey Steve Donaghue, see Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 3. For Smith’s poetic adventures on horseback, see, for example, ‘The Ride’ (*CPD*, p. 315), ‘Who Shot Eugenie?’ (pp. 334-6), ‘The Blue from Heaven’ (pp. 354-6).

<sup>29</sup> Smith may have been thinking of Antoine Coysevox’s famous marble sculpture in Paris of Mercury riding Pegasus (1701-02); both this work and a companion statue of Fame astride the white horse represent distortions of mythology contrived to extol the accomplishments of Louis XIV: see <[www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/fame-and-mercury](http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/fame-and-mercury)> (accessed 14 Aug. 2015). Thanks are due to Dr Genevieve Liveley and Professor Richard Buxton of the University of Bristol for classical conferral. The latter has added a further thread to the interpretative tangle by noting that the twin Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux/Polydeuces), famous riders, are also associated with a white horse and with descents to the underworld.

<sup>30</sup> Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary*, s.v. Janus. See also Barbera and McBrien, p. 97 (‘it is Janus, not Mercury, who was associated with “looking two ways” and having “doors open before him”’) and Lee, note to ‘The Ambassador’, in *A Selection*, p. 201 (‘Smith has mixed Mercury and Janus together’).

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. Hermes, <[www.britannica.com/topic/Hermes-Greek-mythology](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Hermes-Greek-mythology)> (accessed 14 Aug. 2015).

<sup>32</sup> In interview, Smith said, ‘I am not a trained drawer, you know. It’s rather more like the higher doodling, or perhaps just doodling without the higher’: see Peter Orr, ‘Stevie Smith’, in *id.* (ed.), *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*

---

(1966), pp. 225-31: 229. The illustration accompanies 'The Ambassador' in *Harold's Leap* (1950), p. 29, *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, ed. James MacGibbon (1975; Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 247, and *CPD*, p. 282, but is not present in *Selected Poems* (1962), p. 52, *Selected Poems*, ed. MacGibbon (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 134, or *A Selection*, ed. Lee, p. 114. The fact that the picture – like the epigraph – comes and goes between editions only unsettles the ground of interpretation further.

<sup>33</sup> *Collected Poems*, ed. MacGibbon, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, pp. 83-4

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Jack Barbera, 'The Relevance of Stevie Smith's Drawings', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 12/2 (July 1985), 221-36: 233.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, letter to Rachel Marshall, 1 Jan. 1942, in *Me Again*, pp. 280-1: 280.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Smith, letter to Naomi Replansky, 30 May 1954, in *Me Again*, p. 298.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, letter to Rupert Hart-Davis, Oct. 1936, in *Me Again*, pp. 255-7: 255. For a similar montage of Smith's varying views on the relations between poems and pictures, see *A Selection*, ed. Lee, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 153; Martin Pumphrey, 'Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry', *Critical Quarterly*, 28/3 (1986), 85-96: 89; Eleanor Risteen Gordon, 'Daddy, Mummy and Stevie: The Child-Guise in Stevie Smith's Poetry', *Modern Poetry Studies*, 11 (1983), 232-44: 240.

<sup>41</sup> See *NYP*, pp. 162-3: 'one day you may figure as a case-sheet in one of those books the smarties write, that have such high-up titles'. May notes that Smith's 'caricatures of professional literary readers in her poems and novels find them, without exception, to be pompous, self-regarding, and belittling to their subjects' and considers how her poetry, in being 'uniquely immune to academic treatment', 'undermines the act of reading itself, provoking a perpetual cycle of "misreadings": see *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, pp. vi, 20.

<sup>42</sup> George Santayana, cited in May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 209, n. 13.